



Texts in Context

Preaching to an Alien Culture: Resources in the Corinthian Letters

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PAUL THE PASTOR FELT THE BURDEN OF MINISTRY. "THE CARE FOR ALL THE churches," he called it. The church at Corinth gave him more than its fair share of that care, as his two surviving letters show. Pastors often feel themselves deuterio-Pauls in their care for their own parishes. That makes the Corinthian letters a *vademecum* for ministry—that's how my professor described them for us when I was a seminary student. It's true, too. But they are also a marvelous resource for preaching. I don't mean that they simply give us good texts for preaching—though they do that too. No, they should shape our preaching, form us as ministers, and also give direction to our preaching in the post-modern world. I will try to sketch out some aspects of their role in this brief discussion.

I. THE CORINTHIAN CONTEXT

One reason these letters should give direction to our preaching is that the context for ministry today is close to Paul's world. Though Corinth had a long and

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distinguished history as a Greek city, a Roman army in 146 B.C. brought almost total destruction. After the site lay relatively uninhabited for a century, Julius Caesar refounded the city in 44 B.C. as a Roman colony. It was, in a sense, a “new city,” whose inhabitants looked to Rome as a source of inspiration. The colonists, drawn from the lower classes of Rome, became the local elite—*nouveau riche* proud of their new status.¹ It is very possible that Erastus (Rom 16:23) was a descendent of that group of colonists. The similarities to American pride in “making it” in our poly-ethnic society are clear.

Corinth was a poly-ethnic city. It rapidly rose back to prominence because of its favorable location, controlling the isthmus by means of its port cities, Cenchreae and Lechaion. That brought people from elsewhere in the world to Corinth. Their presence is shown by the temple to Egyptian Osiris in the forum, the temple of Isis at Cenchreae, and the crude lintel block with the inscription [ΣΨΝΑ]ΓΩΓΕ ΗΒΡ[ΑΙΩΝ] (Synagogue of the Hebrews).

It was a poly-religious world, with much movement of races. Corinth, as both literature and archaeology have shown, was a religious and ethnic crossroads. Of the traditional pantheon Apollo, Aphrodite, Asklepios, Athena, Clarian Apollo (an oracular god), Demeter and Persephone, Hera Akraia, all had temples close to the forum of Corinth. The west side of the forum included a temple to the city’s Tyche (deity of luck or fortune), and a large temple, possibly dedicated to Rome, towered over the shops to the west of the forum. Add to that Poseidon’s precinct at the Isthmia (with the area sacred to Palaimon), and the ancient Greek religion also survived (possibly in its Roman appropriation). The Roman influence is clear from the predominance of Latin inscriptions of the first century and in the three basilicas on three sides of the forum, one of which had statues of Caesar Augustus, two of his sons, and of Nero (the so-called Julian Basilica on the east side). As the provincial capital of Achaia it was the seat of the proconsular governor of southern Greece.

The Corinthian Christians were drawn from and rooted in that society. The names of Corinthian Christians known to us show this multi-ethnic background. Chloe (1 Cor 1:11), Stephanos and Achaikos (1 Cor 16:17), Jason, Sosipater (Rom 16:21), and Erastus (Rom 16:23) bear Greek names,² while Fortunatus (1 Cor 16:17), Aquila, and Priska (1 Cor 16:19), Lucius (Rom 16:21), Tertius, the scribe Paul used to write Romans, Gaius (Paul’s host) and Quartus (Rom 16:22-23) all carry Latin names. They also represented the class divisions present in Corinthian society.

Corinthian Christians reflected that society in their life together. Their Chris-

¹See Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, O.P., *St. Paul’s Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Good News Studies 6; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), and Donald Engels, *Roman Corinth* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

²The well-known inscription with the name of Erastus from the theater plaza is in Latin: *Erastus pro aedilitate suae s[uo] p[ro] pecunia or pondere] stravit* (“Erastus in thanks for a successful term as aedile laid this pavement at his own expense”). The inscription presents Erastus as a city benefactor, one mode of securing status in a Greco-Roman city. Compare the inscription on the Babrius monument at the western end of the Corinthian forum (agora).

tianity was forged by combining Paul's proclamation to them with the assumptions, attitudes, and norms of their own society. The cornucopia of problems in the parish is well known (and will not be interpreted in detail here): internal divisions gathered around leaders (possibly to be understood as *μυσταγωγοί*, 1 Corinthians 1-4); problems in sexual morality and marriage (1 Corinthians 5-7), including seeking solutions to these problems in secular law courts (1 Cor 6:1-8); participation in the worship of non-Christian gods (1 Corinthians 8-10), including cultic meals (1 Cor 10:14-11:1); problems in worship life – ritual security (1 Cor 10:1-15), the role of women (1 Cor 11:1-6), eucharistic divisions (1 Cor 11:17-34), glossolalia (1 Corinthians 14; cf. 1 Cor 13:1, "tongues of angels"), and lack of clarity about the future resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). They showed their desire for status in the claim that some of them were *πνευματικοί* ("Spirit-endowed people," 1 Cor 3:1; 12:1; 14:1, 37; 15:44, 46), possessing knowledge that elevated them over other less gifted Christians – they knew "the deep things of God" (1 Cor 2:10), thus being "of high status" (note the use of *φρόνιμος*, *ἰσχυρός*, and *ἔνδοξος*, 1 Cor 4:10, and Paul's stressing of the opposites in 1 Cor 1:26). These problems are actually a set of inferences drawn from an underlying interpretation of baptism as a form of mystery initiation.³ That helps to explain Paul's surprising statement thanking God he had baptized few of them, "for Christ sent me out not to baptize, but to proclaim good news, not in the wisdom of argumentation [or rhetoric], in order that the cross of Christ not be nullified" (1 Cor 1:14-17). Their baptismal theology led to the views that one could guarantee one's status before God ritually (1 Corinthians 10), make salvation certain liturgically by ingesting as much bread and wine in the Lord's meal as possible (1 Cor 11:17-34), and achieve status by means of religious utterance. There was probably also a crisis in local leadership, as 1 Cor 16:15-18 implies. Enough to make any minister's spirits fall.

The situation in 2 Corinthians differs, but with some of the same underlying assumptions. They thought Paul's bodily presence and speech weak and despicable (2 Cor 10:10) – a sign he was not pneumatically endowed. They searched for marks of status in him, but he had no letters of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1-3), showed no "distinguishing signs of an apostle" (2 Cor 12:12), and fell short of an authenticating life style. His frequent problems with Jewish and Gentile authorities and misfortunes on the road showed God must not really approve of him (2 Cor 4:7-12; 6:3-10; 11:16-32).

II. PAUL'S RESPONSE

The search for religious security, the drive for status (strokes and recognition), and the temptation to conform one's faith to the norms of the surrounding culture and society are as much modern as ancient Corinthian phenomena. A social-historical approach to the Corinthian letters is very helpful for under-

³For an interesting, highly readable account see Ernst Käsemann, "For and Against a Theology of Resurrection," *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 59-84.

standing Corinthian Christianity.⁴ The preacher's task often is to find the correlative social-cultural manifestation in our own world. In the rest of this short essay I want to point to some aspects of Paul's response as a model for our work at the turn of the millennium. Consideration of the Corinthian letters will give both content and character to the proclamation of the gospel in the new millennium.

How does one reach out to people in a society that makes multiple claims to our central allegiance? Significantly, Paul does not respond by asking people to withdraw from the culture in which they live. Paul's vocabulary in the Corinthian letters is drawn from the Corinthians' expression of their faith: argument of speech (λόγος, 1 Cor 1:5; 2:1, 4; 2), knowledge and wisdom (γνῶσις, σοφία, 1 Cor 1:5, 17; 2:1, 4, 5, 7, 13), spirit-related language (πνεῦμα, πνευματικός, 1 Cor 2:4, 13, etc.), denigration of flesh and the body (σὰρξ, σῶμα, 1 Cor 3:1, etc.). Like a good rhetorician Paul accepts the terms within which they think and then uses their own categories and values to draw out the implications of baptism and the gospel for their lives.

Paul starts from the gospel – even at the expense of baptism (1 Cor 1:13, 17)! And that means his response is centered in Christ (1 Cor 1:18, 2:2). The grace of God had been given to them “in Christ Jesus” so that “in him” they were enriched with all spiritual gifts (1 Cor 1:4-5). He carries that through consistently in both letters! When he “sings” what Rudolf Bultmann calls the “mightiest expression of freedom” in 1 Cor 3:21-23,⁵ he can confidently assert, “all things are yours,” only to add, “but you belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God.” That belonging to Christ is the consequence of baptism, where the Corinthians made the basic confession “Jesus is Lord” (κύριος Ἰησοῦς, 1 Cor 12:3) that put them under Jesus.

Thus the divisions under differing baptizers is countered by pointing out that Christ was not divided up and these leaders were not crucified for them (1 Cor 1:13). The immoral practitioner of incest, forbidden both in Jewish and Roman law,⁶ is to be handled with “the power of our Lord Jesus” (1 Cor 5:4). The ones who possess the knowledge that there is only one God should recognize that not all have that knowledge (1 Cor 8:4, 7). While food does not recommend us to God (1 Cor 8:8), exercising one's authority (ἐξουσία, 1 Cor 8:9) by eating meat offered to idols, the demonstration of knowledge and a strong conscience, can destroy the weak one “for whom Christ died” (1 Cor 8:11). Since Christ died for weak persons, disregarding the weak one disregards Christ, i.e., sins against him. Thus the weak person, because of Christ's death, becomes the boundary for the freedom and authority of the stronger one.

⁴See *inter alia* Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale, 1983); Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995); Philip F. Esler, *The First Christians in Their Social Worlds* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994) 37-51.

⁵Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-55) 1.331.

⁶Gaius, *Inst.* 1.63; Cicero, *Pro Cluent.* 6; *Pro Lig.* 1.1. See Klingmüller, “Incastum,” *RE* 9.2, col. 1247 (Stuttgart, 1916); Kunkel, “Matrimonium,” *RE* 14, col. 2259ff.; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 96.

Mutatis mutandis, Paul also uses Christ as the touchstone in 2 Corinthians—though with quite a change in stress. Whereas in 1 Corinthians he stressed the cross and death of Jesus, in 2 Corinthians he concentrates more on the resurrection of Christ as the demonstration of God’s power. Paul even says that he no longer knows Christ according to flesh (2 Cor 5:16), a position that would have agreed with the Corinthians in the first letter. 2 Cor 5:17 goes on to speak of the new creation (καινή κτίσις) in Christ, so that all old things have passed away, everything is new. In 2 Cor 13:3-4 Paul speaks of the Christ who is powerful in his speaking, for “he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives out of God’s power.” A change in accent, but a continued stress on the centrality of Christ is clear.

III. CHRIST-CENTERED PREACHING

So a reading of Corinthians pulls us to christocentric, at times even staurocentric proclamation. Paul’s letters are a warning against moralism in proclamation, against non-evangelical preaching.

Paul locates the gospel within the tradition of the church. Simply because Paul is the earliest known writer of the church, who stresses his independence of the Jerusalem authorities, we tend to think of him as a great theological innovator—as he was. Paul made a great leap forward in deciding to proclaim Jesus to non-Jews without insisting that they become Jews to be members of the Christian church. He gives the theological justification for that in Romans 4 and Galatians.

But Paul also insisted that he was in continuity with the apostolic proclamation: “Whether therefore I or they [i.e., the apostles before Paul], that’s the way we preach and that’s the way you came to faith” (1 Cor 15:11). Paul here claims that his gospel is not a novelty, not singular. To justify that he explicitly cites an early Christian creed in 1 Cor 15:3-5, marked off by the technical terms for the reception and passing on of tradition (παραλαμβάνω, παραδίδωμι). This passage is not unique. Paul also explicitly cites early Christian tradition about the Lord’s supper in 1 Cor 11:23-26 and argues from it that the Lord’s meal⁷ proclaims the death of Jesus. Both citations of tradition relate therefore to his central stress on the crucified and risen Christ. The tradition informs and explicates his christology.

Paul cites other early Christian traditions, without necessarily identifying them. He uses the basic baptismal confession, “Lord is Jesus” (κύριος Ἰησοῦς, 1 Cor 12:3), to stress that baptism is related to the crucified Jesus, not only to the resurrected Christ. In 1 Cor 8:6 he cites a two-member creation creed:

For us there is one God, the Father,
From whom are all things and we [are directed] to him,
And one Lord, Jesus Christ,
Through whom are all things and we through him.⁸

⁷I personally would translate this the “Lordly banquet,” because κυριακόν is an adjective, not the possessive of κύριος.

⁸On this early creed see J. G. D. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (2nd ed.; London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 53-56, and *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 179-83; Reginald H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1965) 230-231.

He also seems to use liturgical traditions from the Lord's supper in 1 Cor 10:16 (a modification of the *berachah* in the Passover ritual?) and, possibly, in 1 Cor 16:20-24.⁹ This use of earlier traditions could be expanded greatly if we drew on other Pauline letters.

Paul also uses the Old Testament in the Corinthian letters, but once again in the light of Christ. Think of only three passages. He picks up the story of the exodus in 1 Cor 10:1-4 to warn against a false sense of security derived from baptism (1 Cor 10:2) and the sacramental meal. Israel had a food and drink that conveyed the Spirit (πνευματικόν)—and yet they fell in the wilderness. The Spirit-carrying drink came from the rock that followed them—Paul refers to a Jewish haggadic tradition in which the rock Moses struck in the wilderness (Exod 17:1-7) detaches itself and follows them through the wilderness, as Num 20:2-13 suggests.¹⁰ He identifies the rock as Christ, possibly based on the early Christian identification of Jesus as the rock of Isa 28:26 (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-6).¹¹

Paul does a similar thing with Genesis 1-2 in 1 Cor 15:44-48, the discussion of the physical and Spirited bodies (ψυχικόν, πνευματικόν). Philo had identified the man created in Genesis 1 as heavenly (asomatic), the man in Genesis 2 as earthly, formed out of earth like a mud-pie, a copy of the heavenly man.¹² Paul reverses this Platonic reading of the Old Testament text. The resurrection of Jesus shows that the second man is the heavenly man, since the first became a living being, the second a "life-producing Spirit" (πνεῦμα ζωοποιού). Once again the meaning of the Old Testament unfolds in the light of Jesus. Paul elevates this into a hermeneutical principle in 2 Cor 3:4-18. A veil, laid over Moses, prevents the understanding of the Torah. But when one turns to the Lord, who is Spirit (Jesus), the veil is removed, Moses becomes clear, and we are metamorphosed from glory to glory.

The implications should be clear from this. We live, like Paul, inside a tradition. But in the light of Jesus, the resurrected, the tradition dare not become traditionalism. Christ makes all things new, including the tradition. The Corinthian letters teach us to respect the tradition and to critique it in the light of Christ.

This christological centering of the gospel also informs Paul's delineation of community as the body of Christ. The most notable illustration of this is the use of the "body of Christ" metaphor to describe the church in 1 Cor 10:17 and 12:12-31. Baptism is baptism into Christ, participation in all he gives. But it is also a change in identity. One is first a member of the community (the body of Christ) and only secondarily an individual (1 Cor 12:27). That changes all relationships. No one suffers or rejoices alone in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:26). The Lord's supper has

⁹See Günther Bornkamm, "On the Understanding of Worship B. The Anathema in the Early Christian Lord's Supper Liturgy," *Early Christian Experience* (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1969) 169-79.

¹⁰See F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 91. He refers to Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 10.7.

¹¹See Barnabas Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London: SCM, 1961) 169-86; C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London: Nisbet, 1962) 41-53.

¹²Philo, *De Opificio Mundi* 134; *Leg. Alleg.* 1.31.

the same communal character: the one loaf we eat makes the one body (1 Cor 10:17). Such participation has two effects. (1) It rules out participation in other communal meals. “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of godlets; you cannot share in the table of the Lord and the table of godlets (δαιμόνια, 1 Cor 10:21). (2) The least member becomes the criterion of eating and drinking the Lord’s supper. If you disregard some who go hungry, you do not recognize the Lord’s body. “Therefore, welcome one another when you gather to eat” (1 Cor 11:33).

Thus edification, not self-expression, is the hallmark of worship. That is the ultimate burden of 1 Corinthians 13-14. In context the great “hymn to love” in 1 Corinthians 13 describes what the attitude in worship should be. Therefore worship should be done to edify one another. Even the most pyrotechnical spiritual gifts (glossolalia and gifts of healing) should serve to edify. Edification takes place when worship is inclusive to such a degree that the non-Christian who enters the assembly understands what is going on (1 Cor 14:22-25). Worship should show Christian love in action in the body of Christ, or it is not worship. In this connection one must read the Pauline words about the diversity of gifts and functions (I hesitate to call them offices this early in the history of the church).

To be evangelical is not wishy-washy. The gospel of Christ has life implications. The man in 1 Cor 6:1-5 must be rebuked for his ultimate rescue. Paul himself in 2 Corinthians speaks very bluntly about the “Super Apostles” (2 Cor 12:11-13). He reminds the Corinthians that an unworthy eating of the Lord’s supper turns the power of the meal against one. “That’s why many among you are weak, and sickly, and quite a few have died” (1 Cor 12:30). Paul’s stress on God’s grace in Christ does not mean that he has no directives to give, cannot speak a word of law or guidance.

This stress on community before individuals, on service to others before self-expression, on the neighbor as boundary to personal liberty – even when one knows that one is right – is a most difficult thing to proclaim persuasively. But Paul makes clear that it is essential to the understanding of the church.

Paul’s problems became the source of personal growth and understanding. Krister Stendahl has pointed out that Paul faced two major problems in his ministry: the unbelief of his own people, and Paul himself.¹³ “It troubled him no end that God did not see fit to keep him healthy and able to function at all times. Paul seems to have had a serious physical handicap (my unprovable guess is that he was an epileptic), and he did not think that was good planning on God’s part, since he was so important, and time was so short.” Paul understood – gradually, to be sure – that his physical problems focused him more surely on the gospel, as did the “political” and physical dangers he encountered in his ministry.¹⁴ Here 2 Corinthians has a great role to play in forming the self-image of the clergy. Not all controversy is fruitless, not all opposition evil. The Corinthian letters show us how to shape our self-image, forming it on the mind of Christ, as Paul did. His problems

¹³Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 1-2.

¹⁴See C. K. Barrett, *The Signs of an Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972).

showed him that God's grace was enough to counteract the worst physical distress and revive the lowest spirit (2 Cor 12:7-10).

The Corinthian letters are a guide to the life and work of the church and its clergy. They call for a renewed commitment to the centrality of Christ, to the unfolding of his significance in the life and worship of the church and its members. They challenge us to help people realize that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor 5:17), to beseech people on behalf of Christ (2 Cor 5:20) "not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Cor 6:1). ⊕